

A not-quite-true story . . .

Imaginary Jesus

**MATT
MIKALATOS**

BARNA 

AN IMPRINT OF TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.





Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com.

TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Barna and the Barna logo are trademarks of George Barna.

BarnaBooks is an imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Imaginary Jesus

Copyright © 2010 by Matt Mikalatos. All rights reserved.

Cover photo copyright © by Bob Thomas/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Author photo copyright © 2009 by Griffin Gibson. All rights reserved.

Designed by Beth Sparkman

Published in association with the literary agencies of Wes Yoder of The Ambassador Literary Agency, 1107 Battlewood Street, Franklin, TN 37069 and Esther Fedorkevich, Fedd and Company Inc., 9759 Concord Pass, Brentwood, TN 37027.

Some Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Some Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Some names, characters, places, and incidents in this book are the product of the author's imagination. In fact, that's a major plot point of the book. Others are based on the author's memory of events and experiences, though he has changed these when it pleased him or the story demanded it. Sometimes it's hard to tell which is which. Hint: the talking donkey is made up.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mikalatos, Matt.

Imaginary Jesus / Matt Mikalatos.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-3563-6 (pbk.)

1. Jesus Christ—Fiction. 2. Imaginary companions—Fiction. 3. Portland (Or.)—

Fiction. I. Title.

PS3613.I45I43 2010

813'.6—dc22

2009044448

Printed in the United States of America.

16 15 14 13 12 11 10

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TO THE HATE CLUB—
the most bitter,
vicious, mean-spirited,
poorly tempered,
merciless friends
a guy could ever
hope to find.

Keep up the excellent work.



At the Red and Black

Jesus and I sometimes grab lunch at the Red and Black Café on Twelfth and Oak. It's decorated in revolutionary black and red, with posters and pictures of uprisings on the walls. The menu is vegan, which means that there are no animal products in the food. No meat, in other words. No honey, for that matter, because we don't want to steal from the hardworking bees.

The employees run the restaurant like a commune. There's no manager, and no one's in charge. I like to pick up the books and zines they sell and pretend to be a hard-core Portlander. Jesus likes the funky Portland vibe, and he thinks the socialist ethic that runs it is cute. He also likes the painting of Bruce Springsteen next to the counter, which has the caption, "The Only Boss We Listen To." He laughs at that every single time.

I was sitting by the round table with the chessboard painted on it, and Jesus was sitting across from me, his legs crossed and one sandaled foot bouncing to the music. I had my Bible open in front of me but sort of pushed behind a notebook so no one could see it. If someone figured out it wasn't a copy of Marx, I was pretty sure I might get stoned, and not from the

secondhand smoke. Jesus had just put his earbuds in when the waitress brought me my vegan chili. This is the price you pay to be cool in this town. I took a bite, wished it had some meat in it, and poured as much Tapatio into it as I could stand. As I stirred the taste into my food, I realized that the worst possible thing had happened. They had forgotten my chips.

“They forgot my tortilla chips.”

Jesus tossed his hair back and pulled an earbud out. “What was that?”

“They forgot my tortilla chips.”

“I thought that might happen.” He smiled.

“I’m going to ask them to bring some out.”

Jesus smiled that same serene, knowing smile and shook his head. He does that sometimes. He doesn’t overtly disagree with my actions, but I still get the feeling he’s unhappy with me. Which annoys me. I took another bite of chili, and around my (meatless) mouthful I said, “What? What’s wrong with asking for my tortilla chips?”

“Leave the poor communists alone,” he said. “So they forgot your chips, so what? Show them how a nice Christian doesn’t throw a fit when he’s wronged.”

“Humph.” Under my breath I added, “Maybe you could turn my napkin into some tortilla chips.”

“Then how would you wipe the chili off your chin?”

He was right. Chili was dripping off my chin. I wiped it off with my sleeve, just to teach him a lesson. He smiled and replaced his earbuds, and I turned my attention back to my Bible, which was weird with him sitting right across the table. It was like giving him a chance to talk when here I was, talking to him.

“You seem cranky today,” Jesus said. “Are you angry with me?”

“You should know, Mr. Omniscience.”

“I’d like you to tell me,” he answered kindly.

“You know why I’m upset with you,” I said darkly, not liking the turn this conversation had taken. I tried to find something to distract me, which is always easy at the good ol’ Red and Black.

The best thing about the Red and Black is the customers. I worked at a comic book store back in the day, and I miss the steady stream of weirdos, misfits, and losers tromping through to talk about Dr. Doom. No one at the Red and Black wants to talk about Dr. Doom. That childish comic-book villain has been replaced by whomever happens to be president of the United States at any given moment. I sometimes hope that a future president will become fiercely disfigured and choose to wear a scowling metal mask to disguise his acid-scarred face. It would add a little melodrama to the Portland political scene.

The other best thing, if I could be allowed two best things, is that no one notices Jesus when we’re at the restaurant together. He sits there with his iPod, smiling to himself, and no one notices the way he’s dressed or the shiny glow of his halo getting all over everything.

A commotion at the counter broke my concentration. Commotion at the counter is part of life at the Red and Black, and to be honest, this is the third thing that is best: I often get distracted from my Bible and see something exciting. The most common source of commotion is the fact that the Red and Black refuses to take credit cards. To add to the insult, they will allow you to get money from your bank account by typing

your ATM code into a pad connected to the cash register. After charging you a monstrous fee, they hand you cash out of the register. Why you can't use the same ATM pad to merely make a purchase is unclear. The downtown Suits who eat here get bent out of shape because the Red and Black doesn't participate in our financial system the way Big Business requires.

But the problem today came from a big-boned man, knotted with muscle, his black beard streaked with gray and spilling onto his wide chest. He wore dirty work jeans and a dark blue shirt that strained to contain him. "What do you mean 'no salmon'? This is the Pacific Northwest." He leaned in close to the woman taking his order, who gave him a look so weighted with disdain it could barely make it the seven inches from her eyes to his.

"We're vegan," she said. "*Vegan*. No meat. No animal products. *Fish* are *animals*."

The man looked like his eyes were going to bulge out of his head and slap her, but he took a deep breath and leaned back. "No fish. Okay. I'll get a glass of water and think about it." He walked to the side of the counter and poured himself a cup, then, to my chagrin, looked over and caught me staring. His eyes darted to my table, saw my Bible, and a wide grin broke out on his face. *Oh, great*. He was a Christian.

There aren't a lot of Christians in Portland, which means that when we see each other there's an obligatory minority dance that goes on. At the very least you have to raise your eyebrows and tip your chin up at one another. Some genres of Christian require that you talk about how hard life is in Portland (which it isn't). Some want to sit down and talk about their favorite book or the latest thing they learned

on The KROS. That's our radio station. It's like a Christian ghetto on the airwaves. Safe for young people, positive words, okay music.

"Jesus," I hissed. "Keep that guy from coming over here."

Jesus looked over at the guy, who was only a few steps away now, and rolled his eyes. "Oh, man. Not him." He stood up. "Listen, I'm going to go check the parking meter."

I almost spilled my chili. "*What?* You can't leave me here with him."

Jesus looked at me sternly. "You prayed not to get a ticket while parked illegally in front of the café."

"I also prayed that there would be some quarters squirreled away in my car and *someone* didn't provide."

Jesus pointed his finger at me. "Watch it, Mikalatos. You know I don't care for your back talk." Then he stood up, and with a swirl of his robes he walked out the door, just as the hairy bear of a Christian man squeezed himself in at my table.

"Pete Jonason." He held out a powerful hand as wide as my plate. I shook it, doing my best to look incredibly busy. I could tell he worked the docks or something. A pungent smell of salt, fish, and ocean hung around him.

"Matt," I said.

He took a drink of his water, made a face, and spit it back into his cup. "They put some sort of chemicals in the drink."

He was right. The water had a weird taste. "I think it's rose water or something. They're completely organic here. I assume they wouldn't use chemicals."

Pete leaned back, his dark eyes staring at me with an unblinking ferocity that made me uncomfortable. I took another bite of chili. "You make a lot of assumptions, Matt."

He forgot about the water, took another sip, grunted, and spit it into his cup. He nodded in the direction of the door. Jesus stood out there, talking to a traffic cop who appeared to be writing a ticket for my truck. "I see that Jesus is wearing the traditional robes and powder blue sash today."

I choked on my chili. "You can *see* him?"

Pete cracked his enormous knuckles. "Sure. Just like anybody who's paying attention." He scratched behind his head with one big hand, the other resting lightly on the table. "Can I ask you a question?"

I sighed and closed my Bible. "Yeah."

"Why does your Jesus still wear a robe?"

"What do you mean?" I looked at Jesus, who had reentered the café. He flashed me a quick grin, which I took to mean he had taken care of the parking ticket, and sat down at a table across the café, by the window. Meaning I was stuck here with Pete the Christian.

"What I mean is, here's God, the creator of the universe. He becomes a human being and lives on Earth for thirty-three years. He completely assimilates to human culture. Wears our clothes. Wears a body like ours. Eats our food. But here he is, two thousand years later, and he's still wearing robes and a sash. Seems like he might put on a pair of jeans every once in a while. They're a great invention, jeans."

I watched Jesus thoughtfully. "That *is* weird. I guess I never thought about it."

Pete leaned in close, and I could smell the overpowering aroma on his breath when he said, "Let's go ask him about it."

I sighed. "Okay." We stood and walked over to him. Jesus smiled and offered me the chair across from him, and Pete

towered over us, his arms crossed over his barrel chest. "This is Pete," I said.

"We've met." Jesus nodded.

"I don't recall," Pete said.

"We were just talking," I said, "and Pete asked me why you still wear two-thousand-year-old clothing. We were talking about the innovation of jeans, and we thought you might like them."

Jesus laughed. "It's just that these robes are so comfortable."

Pete looked outside. "Pretty rainy out there. You're wearing desert clothes. Aren't you cold?"

"Ha ha," Jesus said. "You need to read your Bible more, Pete. You may recall where it says, 'I, the Lord, do not change.'"

An excellent point, and straight out of the Bible. Score one for Jesus. I looked to Pete, who was scowling. "That verse doesn't refer to changing clothes," Pete said.

Jesus studied his fingernails, pretending to look for dirt. "Why don't you let me do the Scripture interpretation, Pete."

"Matt, let me ask you something," Pete said. "Is this guy better than you at anything?"

I thought carefully. "He's certainly nicer than me. And he has this way of expressing disapproval without actually saying anything. I've never been able to do that." I examined Jesus' face for a minute, his blue eyes shining merrily. "He has better hair. Mine is so fine and thin, and his is thick and silky."

"You're not the real Jesus." Pete grabbed a chair from another table and scooted in close, practically in Jesus' face. I put a hand on his arm and told him to calm down, but he ignored me and said, "What exactly do you want from my friend Matt here?"

Jesus stared at him. “I have plans to prosper him, plans for peace. I want him to be happy and rich. If he follows my instructions, that’s exactly what will—”

Pete punched Jesus hard, in the face, causing his head to snap to the right and bounce off the window. I jumped up to intervene. Pete dragged Jesus from the table, and Jesus kicked over his chair, feet flailing. Pete had him in a bear hug, and Jesus elbowed him in the stomach. Pete lost his grip, grabbed Jesus by the hair, and slammed him to the ground. I shoved Pete with all my strength and he stumbled backward, flipping over a table and shattering a chair on the way down.

I helped Jesus up. “Are you okay? You should have called down some angels to protect you.”

With a guttural roar, Pete launched himself across the table, straight for Jesus’ head. Jesus sidestepped, turned, and ran out the door. Pete shook himself off and rose to go after him, but before he could leave, I picked up a leg from the broken chair and clocked him as hard as I could right in the back of the head. That didn’t stop him, but it did slow him down enough for Jesus to get a good head start. I watched as he gathered his robes in his hands and ran like crazy, his white legs flashing out, his sandals eating the pavement like a dog licking ice cream.

Pete stood up, rubbing his head. He glared at me and then at the rapidly retreating Jesus. “Damn it,” he said and kicked the table.

“You shouldn’t curse.”

“Sometimes a curse is called for. That—” Pete pointed out the window at the racing back of my Lord—“that was an imaginary Jesus, my friend. I choose my words carefully, and I said what I meant. And now that we’re onto him, he’s going to run.”

I crossed my arms and frowned. “I’ve known Jesus for a long time. What makes you think that you know him better than I do?”

“Because,” Pete said, headed for the door, “I’m the apostle Peter.”